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Rob Simmons: Young Man with a Penchant for 'Blood and Thunder' Turns to the Quiet Life

By DEBORAH FITTS

STONINGTON — If it hadn't been for the Vietnam War, Robert Ruhl Simmons might well have become a journalist, and then he would have missed coming in out of the cold as a CIA spy and exchanging that for the fierce heat of battle on Capitol Hill.

Now the battles too are behind him: he resigned two weeks ago as chief of staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee in favor of a return to his Stonington roots and a period of relative tranquility.

"I decided with two young children and family and friends in Stonington that maybe it was time to come home," says Simmons, at ease in the study of his Broad Street house in the Borough. Near him are tidy stacks of pictures still to be hung and things to be put away, including a large photo of Sen. Barry Goldwater inscribed "For Rob — a real helper in a tough job," and an American flag in a box.

Simmons left his post amid a glow of praise both from the Senate, which sprang a surprise resolution of commendation on him Jan. 31, and from CIA director William Casey, who awarded him the agency's coveted medallion the following day.

The ceremonies of these two traditional adversaries — appropriately, one behind closed doors with members of the intelligance community in attendance and the other in the full light of the Senate chamber — not only point up Simmons' success but symbolize the course of his whole career in intelligence — first on the cloak-and-dagger side, and then in oversight.

A Natural Choice

If the Vietnam War hadn't gobbled him up Simmons might have pursued a career in journalism, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, publisher of the Medford (Ore.) Mail Tribune. His career instead in intelligence was still a natural, he says, because he grew up with a profound interest in "finding the facts of the matter and conveying them as honestly and as clearly as I could."

As chief of staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee for the past three years, Simmons rode herd on 50 employees plus another 15 consultants, operating on a $2 million annual budget and enabling the committee's 15 senators to oversee the entire national intelligence community.

The committee's biggest crisis came last April, when the senators and the CIA were at each other's throats over the discovery that the agency had secretly masterminded the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and launched other assaults against the country's Marxist Sandinista government.

"When you consider our country had diplomatic relations with Nicaragua, it represented a very serious violation of international law," says Simmons. "The U.S was directly involved in activities that could be considered grounds for war."

Blasted by the press and Congress alike, the CIA ran for cover, first asserting Casey had indeed complied with the law and told the committee about the activities — though allowing the senators to assume the contras were responsible — and then saying it was the Senate Intelligence Committee which had postponed briefings on the issue.

That's when the name of Robert R. Simmons began cropping up in the national press, Simmons clearly stating that it was the CIA which delayed the briefings, and calling Casey's protestations that he had kept the committee informed "disingenuous." Casey eventually apologized and the committee emerged in fine shape.

Their Man in Tough Times

In their remarks Jan. 31, several senators made it clear that Simmons was their man in tough times. They mentioned his unfailing and nonpartisan fairness and "courage and dignity," plus a certain penchant for "blood and thunder."

At 42, Simmons has a voracious appetite for human events small and large, and an engaging humor that places them in lively perspective. His eager stream of conversation, occasionally punctuated by full-length waves of the arms, is salted with a boyish sense of fun.

The senators noted some underlying rock-ribbed principles as well. Simmons said he never had a problem switching from Army intelligence officer to CIA agent to Senate staffer because "as a public servant you basically raise your right hand and swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America; there's only one flag."

In the army Simmons opted for training in military intelligence and subsequently spent a year and a half in Vietnam, leaving in 1968 with two bronze stars. He afterwards joined the CIA and was trained as a paramilitary of-

ficer specializing in counterinsurgency. He returned to Vietnam for two years, 1970-72, to the Central Highlands, where he ran spy operations, developed techniques for interrogating Viet Cong suspects, and worked with the Vietnamese on programs designed to counter depradations by guerilla forces.

"The CIA is a can-do sort of organization," says Simmons, implying that its efforts in Vietnam were more suited to the nature of that war than the Army's.

"The army went in for the massive sweep operations. Well, the North Vietnamese could see a sweep coming 10 miles away and duck across the border and disappear, while the Viet Cong would simply put on his farmer's hat and get behind his buffalo and plow a field.

No Quick Fixes

"The army wanted a quick fix, and it just wasn't in the cards. Americans want a problem fixed right away: if there's trouble in the Mideast, where there's been trouble for thousands of years, you send in an envoy to patch it up. A little noise in Central America? Send down a special envoy.

"We don't have a sense of time; we're not willing to commit 10 or 15 years working on a problem."

Simmons ultimately was "frustrated" by the course of the war, and like many Americans "made that sense of frustration a part of my life. It made me stick with the CIA another five years and got me interested in government.

"A lot of people joined the CIA in the late '40s and '50s because they didn't want another Pearl Harbor. Well I didn't want to see another Vietnam. I wasn't an anti-war activist, but I was troubled that our government had undertaken what I felt was a failed policy, and was pouring all our resources down the drain — lives and money and our reputation."

After his Vietnam stint, Simmons was converted from his paramilitary status to being a regular case officer, "a member of the club," and for the next five years worked here and abroad "engaged in — how shall I say it — espionage."

In one Far Eastern country — he's not allowed to say where — he worked under diplomatic cover running undercover operations in a successful effort to avert the government from employing America's gift of nuclear technology to make bombs instead of electricity.

Simmons took a leave from the agency in 1978-79 to attend the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, where he received the distinction of being made one of six Littauer Fellows, which meant free tuition.

"It was my first academic honor," he says, adding with a grin, "In school I was always one or two points ahead of flunk."

On Chafee's Staff

Afterwards he was no longer content to work overseas and left the agency, gravitating to Capitol Hill where in 1979 he eventually overcame the stigma of being a retired CIA agent and won a job with R.I. Sen. John Chafee, a member of the Intelligence Committee.

In 1981 he joined the committee and within months Goldwater asked him to be chief of staff, "and that's when the whirlwind began."

CIA Director Casey's comments during the ceremony 16 days ago highlighted Simmons' key role in enacting legislation protecting the identities of undercover intelligence agents and safeguarding CIA files.

"As someone who had worked undercover I knew the dangers to myself and family if my name was revealed," he says. "After all, the Constitution is not a suicide pact."

At the time the measures were reviled by the media but Simmons now says they have proved no hindrance to a free press.

"I was very proud of the work we did on that bill," he says. "It was a turning point in some respects — the first time we'd passed legislation that supported the men and women of the intelligence community, who are used to being treated like some kind of criminal element. As far as they were concerned, it was standing ovation stuff."

Simmons brings with him now the wisdom of two decades in "the intelligence business." He has the gift of making it all human and understandable.

A Rogue Elephant

"The CIA's role as kingmaker is greatly exaggerated," he says. "But not knowing what it does, people fear the worst. It used to have the reputation of being a rogue elephant, but most of the allegations were unfounded or wildly overblown."

Now, when intelligence-gathering is more critical than ever — thanks to international terrorism and a weapons technology that brings annihilation to our doors within minutes — the intelligence community is stronger than ever because of Congressional oversight, Simmons says, adding, the better Congress understands the work to be done, the more it is likely to provide funds to ensure the work is done well.

Soon Simmons will start teaching a seminar at Yale ("Oversight or Overlook: Congress and the U.S. Intelligence Community"), and start seeing the world from the other side of the closed doors. That means more time with his wife, teacher and writer Heidi Pafford Simmons, and their two children Jane, 7, and Robert, 2, and time for lectures and writing and perhaps involvement in politics.

Simmons reaches behind a lamp on a table in his study and fetches out a wrinkled brown paper bag containing a bottle of decidedly cheap red wine. It was a gift from a friend, he says, who figured he could use it while "hanging around the Borough."

But Simmons grins when asked if life in his beloved village is going to seem dull.

"There's as much excitement here as there is in Congress on a good day," he says.